

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **Paul's Farewell Address: The Kingdom of God - Acts 20:25**

Recent research has concluded that, at current rates of consumption, we'll have used up all the earth's resources by about 2050. Diminishing fish stocks in the seas and oceans are also reported to be a particular area of concern. International effort is required to address these threats and others such as climate change, in order to preserve our planet. Also, many people in the world are suffering from droughts, natural disasters and the like which result in famine and hunger. There are also injustices in many societies. In addition, there are wars and rumours of wars despite all the efforts of the United Nations. In some areas, they're tasked to maintain peace in very insecure situations and on a very fragile basis. The Bible predicts a worsening of these things in the hands of mankind.

However, Christians know that when God intervenes in the world things will be entirely different! God will cause "the kingdoms of this world [to] become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). It's when the kingdom of God is established in power and glory that finally there'll be true righteousness, abiding peace and safety with continuing plenty. A selection of Scriptures readily proves these statements:

### **Worldwide Peace**

"The LORD...shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:3-4).

### **Government and Justice**

"For to us a Child is born, to us a Son is given; and the government shall be on His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. There is no end of the increase of His government and peace on the throne of David, and on His kingdom, to order it and to establish it with judgment and with justice from now on, even forever. The zeal of LORD of Hosts will do this" (Isaiah 9:6-7).

### **Safety and Security**

"A king will reign in righteousness...the work of righteousness will be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever" (Isaiah 32:1 and 17).

### **Worldwide Rule and Authority**

"He shall come down like rain on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In His days the righteous shall flourish; and abundance of peace, until the moon is not. He shall also have the rule from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth...all nations shall serve Him" (Psalm 72:6-8, 11).

### **Abundant Provisions**

"There shall be a fullness of grain in the earth on the top of the mountains; its fruit shall shake like Lebanon, and they of the city shall flourish like grass of the earth. His name shall endure forever; His name shall be continued as long as the sun; and men shall be blessed in Him; all nations shall call Him blessed" (Psalm 72:16-17).

The Lord Jesus instructed His disciples that they ought to pray for this kingdom to be brought in. He said to them, "When you pray, say: 'Our Father, who is in Heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done, as in Heaven, so also on the earth'" (Luke 11:2).

From Luke 19:11-27 we know for a certainty that this kingdom will come. As the Lord journeyed to Jerusalem, some of His followers were expecting the kingdom to be brought in there and then. So He told them a parable in which He likened Himself to a nobleman who "went into a far country to receive a kingdom for himself, and to return" (verse 12). When the Lord Jesus ascended to heaven, He was received up into glory. He was crowned with glory and with

honour. He was given the throne of God with these words: "Sit on My right hand until I make Your enemies Your footstool" (Hebrews 1:13). At His second coming the Lord Jesus will subdue everyone. When He arises from His heavenly throne, the heavens will open and He'll come as the King of kings and Lord of lords to reign over the entire world for a thousand years (Revelation 19:11-20:4).

But in raising Jesus from among the dead and seating Him at His own right hand in heaven, God also made Him both Lord and Christ. The Lordship of Jesus has to do with His authority over people now. When believers acknowledge Jesus as the Lord, they actively participate in His kingdom even though He's not physically crowned king over all (but that time will come, Philippians 2:9-11). It's important to understand that the Kingdom of God is a present reality to Christians. The earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus started when "Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God draws near. Repent, and believe the gospel'" (Mark 1:14-15). However, by the end of His ministry He had to say to the Jewish nation who had rejected Him, their king: "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you and given to a nation bringing out its fruits" (Matthew 21:43).

To see and to enter the kingdom of God, a person must be born of God by means of His word and His Spirit. When Jesus explained this to Nicodemus in John 3:3-8, He illustrated it by reference to the unseen, but real, effect of the wind. In doing so, He introduced the idea that the kingdom of God is to be spiritual in nature. Paul gives its characteristics in Romans 14:17: "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit". These words of Paul highlight the fact that the kingdom of God is a present reality, albeit spiritual rather than material.

To enable His disciples to understand this real, but spiritual form of the kingdom of God, the Lord Jesus spoke about it in parables. He said to them in Matthew 13 that they were given to know the mysteries [the secrets] of the kingdom of heaven (verse 11). (In passing, we should note that in Scripture the terms 'kingdom of God' and 'kingdom of heaven' are virtually interchangeable.) First of all, in the parable of the sower, He described and explained how the kingdom would be formed in the hearts of those who hear the word of God (about salvation in Christ) and believe it. It's those who accept and receive the word of the kingdom who have the potential to produce fruit, verse 23. Next He described the kingdom of God by a series of parables, using the phrase "the kingdom of heaven is like".

1. It's like a farmer who sowed good seed in his field only to find that his enemy had also sown weeds in it! These could only be separated out from the wheat at harvest time. This means that Satan is active against the advance of the kingdom of God.
2. It's like a grain of mustard seed which grows into an immense tree which harbours the birds of the air. This shows that the kingdom of God, in its full grown form, contains all kinds of people: those who are evil, as well as those who are good.
3. It's like a woman baking bread where yeast permeates throughout the dough. This pictures how evil doctrines have been introduced into the kingdom of God, Revelation 2:20.
4. It's like treasure hid in a field so precious to a man that he sells everything that he has in order to purchase the field. This speaks of the value to God of His earthly people, Israel, who are dispersed throughout the world.
5. It's like a merchant man who seeks and finds one pearl of great price. He sells all that he has and buys it. We know that "Christ...loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself as the glorious church, without spot or wrinkle or any such things, but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27).
6. It's like fishermen catching in their net all kinds of fish. When they get to shore they sort the good fish from the bad. The good are the people who are rescued from the world by the preaching of the gospel of the kingdom.

From these descriptions, we learn that in the kingdom of heaven there is both good and evil, both reality and profession. Perhaps the first four parables show the public appearance of the kingdom, whilst the last three describe what God finds of value in it. From the parables of the wheat and the tares and the haul of fish, we learn that God secures what is real for Himself. This is done at the completion of the age, when Christ returns from heaven and judges all that is evil.

However, there are other issues about the kingdom of God that we should consider:

- What should Christians be doing to advance its cause at the present time?
- When will the physical Kingdom occur upon earth?

The first issue is about fruit for God from the lives of Christians. For them, Jesus Christ is Lord and they must be obedient to Him. They must hear, heed and practise the word of the kingdom (Matthew 13:9). He said: "Why do you call Me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). Matthew tells us that the Lord Jesus posed this question

after the Sermon on the Mount, in which He, the great King, explains the principles of His kingdom. He says that subjects in His kingdom are those who practise personal piety. They must be righteous in every aspect of life, whether it's attitudes of heart, practical issues such as personal relationships, or the way they pray. Also they're not to be worldly or anxious about matters such as money, food or clothing. Such things must not dominate their lives. Instead, Christians must seek, as a first priority, the kingdom of God and His righteousness (Matthew 6:33). This righteousness isn't an outward show of "being religious", for that tends to hypocrisy. Rather, it's an inner attitude of heart and mind which correctly deals with self and the seriousness of sin. Positively, it's living in ways which are pleasing to God. Such living has a public effect. Christians are to be salt and light in a dark world of sin and corruption. Sometimes it involves giving natural things up and denying oneself for the kingdom of heaven's sake. At other times, it involves suffering for righteousness' sake or being persecuted for the Name of Christ.

The Lord Jesus also outlines what He expects of His servants in view of the coming visible kingdom of God upon earth. Early in the talk, I referred to the parable of the nobleman in Luke 19. There, Christ's hearers thought that His entry into Jerusalem would provide them an easy route into that kingdom. He told the parable to make His disciples understand that they were to be left behind in the world to live in a hostile world. He showed that under His Lordship, we Christians have no rights or privileges, only responsibilities. Specifically, we're His bond slaves employed by Him until He comes again. However appropriate resources are given to each of us (verse 13). The literal translation of the verse is "trade while I am coming". Believers are to live in the knowledge that He's on His way and that His return is imminent. In Matthew 25:14-30, the parable is told in terms of different number of talents given to each servant in proportion to his ability. This means that both my natural and spiritual gifts are sufficient for me to do the work He has assigned to me. But the objective of the parable in both Gospels is to ensure that we understand that individually we'll have to account for how we used our gifts in the Lord's service! Each servant of the Lord will be generously rewarded for successful trading. In the coming kingdom such servants will reign with Christ over cities according to the amounts gained. But we mustn't overlook the fact that to do the Lord's work demands both faithfulness and commitment, hard work not laziness.

Other parables about the Lord's return provide further instruction about what we are required to do. In Matthew 24:32-25:30, the second part of the Lord's prophetic discourse, there are four parables of instructions to Christ's disciples for the intervening period between His ascension and His coming. In these, we learn that the Lord expects His followers to remain true to Him until He comes again. The first two parables are the parable of the fig tree and the parable of faithful and wicked household servants (24:32-51). They tell us that the Lord expects His disciples to be watching out and waiting for His return by working for Him: "Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming...also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect" (verses 42 and 44). In the household servants parable, the Lord asks the question: "Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season?" (verse 45) He answers this question in the first two parables of chapter 25. (We've already made comment on one of these, the parable of the talents (25:14-30)).

In the parable of the ten virgins (25:1-13) the Lord starts with the words "the kingdom of heaven **shall** be likened" (verse 1) because it concerns "the day ... in which the Son of Man is coming" (verse 13). The Lord says that at the time of His return, those who profess to be His disciples will be like the ten virgins in this parable. Half of them were wise, whilst the other half were foolish. To the world at large, all Christians appear to be the same. But the distinguishing feature in the parable was that the wise took oil reserves with them. To interpret this parable, only half of them were real Christians who have the indwelling Holy Spirit (who is pictured as oil in this parable). But the virgins had this in common, "they all became drowsy and fell asleep" verse 5 (New International Version). Therefore Christians are exhorted to remain awake, in a spiritual sense: "Let us not [go to] sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober" (1 Thessalonians 5:6). Paul goes on to explain in verse 7 why this is so necessary: "For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night". Wakefulness is a sure sign of spiritual life and alertness. The Lord Himself commands: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming", Matthew 25:13). In recent centuries, the truth about the second coming of Christ has been recovered in successive evangelical revivals and subsequent sound biblical teaching. There's been a fulfilment of verse 6: "at midnight a cry was heard: 'Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!'" The Lord is on His way!

We must now turn to the second issue about the kingdom of God: when will Christ's rule come upon earth? The disciples asked this question of the Lord in terms of the signs by which they'd recognise it. In Luke's Gospel, the Lord refers to the fact that "Jerusalem will be trodden down by the nations until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled...At that time they shall see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:24 and 27). This takes us back to Daniel's prophecy: "in the days of these [Gentile] kings, the God of Heaven shall set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed. And the kingdom shall not be left to other peoples, but it shall crush and destroy all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever" (Daniel 2:44). Daniel 2 describes four successive stages of worldwide domination by Gentile powers, which he sees as four beasts in his visions of 7:2-27. It's in the future times of the revived form of the Roman Empire, the last power, that the kingdom is finally established: "And the kingdom and rulership, and the greatness of the kingdom under all the heavens, shall be given to the people of the saints of the

Most High, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom. And all kingdoms shall serve and obey Him" (Daniel 7:27). God achieves this by the dramatic intervention of the Son of Man, the stone cut out without hands: "You watched until a stone was cut out without hands, which struck the image upon its feet which were of iron and clay, and broke them to pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold were broken to pieces together. And they became like the chaff of the summer threshing floors. And the wind carried them away, so that no place was found for them. And the stone that struck the image became a great mountain and filled the whole earth" (Daniel 2:34-35).

In Matthew's account of the Lord's prophetic discourse, 24:4-31 form the first part of the Lord's answer to the disciples' questions. The Lord focuses on the future conditions for the Jews in Judea, especially in Jerusalem, which immediately precede His second coming with power and great glory. The time of the nation's rebirth, the summer time in the Parable of the Fig Tree (24:32-35), is identified as the time when the Kingdom draws near.

Let's finish with Isaac Watt's hymn about the Kingdom of God.

*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun  
Doth his successive journeys run;  
His kingdom stretch from shore to shore,  
Till moons shall wax and wane no more.*

*To Him shall endless prayer be made,  
And praises throng to crown His head;  
His name, like sweet perfume shall rise  
With every morning sacrifice.*

*Let every creature rise and bring  
Peculiar honours to our King;  
Angels descend with songs again,  
And earth repeat the loud Amen.*

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